

# The Humour of the Underman

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**Francis Grierson**

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Estudios sobre la risa











Francis Grierson

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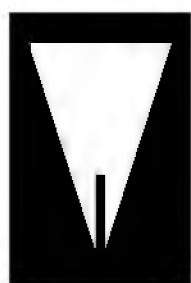
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# THE HUMOUR OF THE UNDERMAN

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# The Humour of the Underman

And Other Essays

By

Francis Grierson

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1911



## THE HUMOUR OF THE UNDERMAN

THERE is a humour of the *Uebermensch*, or Superman, which is direct, axiomatic, and self-assertive ; it springs from knowledge and intuition, as in Shakespeare and Nietzsche, often reasoned, full of a certain moral significance, ironical, sarcastic, and even cynical. It stands for the consciousness of intellectual power ; it is personal. But the humour of Uncle Remus is impersonal, for it represents the underworld of the Underman, without a conscious philosophy and without applied art. In the hands of the great poets and writers humour is allied to criticism. In the stories of Uncle Remus humour is untrammelled by learning and unfettered by ordinary rules of ethics. The unfathomable charm lies in simplicity and naturalness, in



the relation established between the mind of the ignorant Underman and the primitive things of the natural world.

There are moods which become identical with Nature. A tree in leaf, a flower in bloom, is Nature in dreamland ; but the poet is one who gives a form to a mood, and interprets the dreams. In the stories of the negro, as told in Uncle Remus, instinct takes the place of reason. In his hands instinct grapples with mystery, and artlessness fills the place of art. It is here that the Underman rises to the plane of the Overman. The higher we go in the realm of words the simpler the words and expressions become. In the supremest moments in all poetry and prose art is drowned in instinct. Wonder and emotion rise to the surface with the impulsion of a cork to the top of a troubled sea. Simplicity of mind becomes identified with the mysteries of natural things, and the immanence of the instinctive mood renders ingenuity impossible and reason superfluous. At such moments the soul has neither the time nor the inclination to reason about conventions of art ; the instinct is swift and the words brief. Simple emotion makes

Hamlet say: "Oh, that this too, too solid flesh would melt!" There would be no instinctive charm if he made use of the words: "Oh, that this materialistic flesh would dissolve and evaporate." Words of more than three syllables are fatal to direct and simple emotions, but in much of the greatest prose and poetry words of one syllable evoke the most potent charm and the most haunting images. The shortest words are closest to Nature, the longest pertain to philosophy and science. Pedantry makes naivety impossible, and philosophy makes reason a bore. The primitive words were created in obedience to a natural law in the world of sound. The first words were invented to imitate noises and musical tones; with them came expressions of want, fear, instinctive desires and feelings. The long words came with the first metaphysicians, and modern science added to the list by bringing into poetry a vocabulary of hard, unsympathetic, and often meaningless expressions. There is such a thing as poetic science, but no such thing as scientific poetry. Materialism, scepticism, philosophic doubt, scientific vapourings, have done their

utmost to make the true poetic mood impossible.

Most of the vital words belong to the primitive world of sentiment and sensation, and this is why dialect is always more intimate and insinuating than classical prose. "Put your ear to the earth," says Lamennais, "and you will feel the throbbing of the world"; and this is what the Underman has done in the stories of Uncle Remus. The people of Nature's world hear the right sound and sense the right mood; the interpretation is simple, direct, naive, agreeing with the habits, the humour, and the cunning of the animals of the same world; for the negro, left to himself, without any schooling, is, or was, the most entertaining of humorists, because the most natural and the most unconscious. He lives with his finger on the pulse of Nature. With learning, humour becomes strained or cynical. Uncle Remus is as wily as Brer Fox and as simple as Brer Rabbit. His humours, fears, interpretations, and superstitions contain all the sensuous wisdom of the underworld, as when he says: "Come down to dat, Brer Ab, dere ain't nuffin' dat ain't cu'us." He sounds the note of universal

philosophy, the note that made Aristotle a profound observer of the seeming little things in order to understand some of the apparent great ones. At the head as well as at the foot of human nature the impulse of curiosity is the dominant factor. Indeed, the saying, "There is nothing that is not curious," is the beginning of Aristotelian science and the end of Shakespearean philosophy. It is the all in all; here the Overlord descends to the level of the Underman, and the philosophical seer is no nearer Nature than Uncle Remus in all his ignorance and seeming blindness. Uncle Remus and his kin are close observers of natural things, the things our superficial scientists overlook as insignificant or without meaning; for science, in our day, has, in a large measure, skipped the alphabet of life to arrive at a vocabulary of negatives. Men fail in business, in science, in art, in religion, as soon as they skip the small things to grasp the bulky. Greatness does not consist in bulk. It was the inverted idea of greatness that made Napoleon Bonaparte, the first *Uebermensch* of modern politics, lose his crown, Bismarck his prestige, and Nietzsche his reason.



What these Overlords needed was a little of Brer Rabbit's wisdom—namely, “to lie low an' say nuffin'”—that is, after they had attained the attainable. Ambition at the intellectual top is far more dangerous than superstition at the illiterate bottom. There is plenty of superstition in Uncle Remus, but it is delightful and harmless, and certainly there is nothing delightful in the agonies of Napoleon, the humiliation of Bismarck, and the disease of Nietzsche. In the realm of mystery the Underman is the peer of Hamlet in the grave scene, and in the same predicament as Macbeth in the presence of the witches. Uncle Remus says he “despises fer ter heah dogs a-howlin' an' squinch owls havin' de ague, out in de woods,” and that these things make his “bones cold and his flesh creep.” Even the redoubtable Lady Macbeth halts on the threshold and listens to the owl's scream. At such times the phantasmagoria of the night crowd into one brief moment, stars and planets are forgotten, celestial symbols give place to portents of the earth, the bosom of the underworld begins to heave, Nature assumes a voice, every sound becomes prophetic, in the moon-

light of the imagination the curtains of  
mystery sway and shift, a realm of the mind  
is disclosed beyond the limits of category, a  
world without the semblance of a name and  
without the quality of number.





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**J**esse Francis Shepard Grierson (1848-1927) fue un reconocido pianista, compositor, místico y escritor norteamericano. Conocido como “Francis Grierson” en el mundo de las letras, publicó libros sobre misticismo, política, literatura, etc.

Grierson analiza aquí el humor del hombre inferior, antípoda del humor del *ultra hombre* nietzscheano. El de éste es directo, axiomático y autoasertivo, está pleno de significación moral y representa la conciencia del poder intelectual. Es el de Shakespeare o Nietzsche. En cambio, el del hombre inferior es simple, natural e inconsciente, y en él los instintos toman el lugar de la razón. Su representante es el Tío Remus, personaje del folclor afroamericano del sur de los Estados Unidos y narrador de los relatos publicados por Joel Chandler Harris.

El Tío Remus es astuto como el Hermano Zorro y simple como el Hermano Conejo. Su humor está exento de las trabas del aprendizaje y de las reglas ordinarias de la ética. Su risa, sus miedos, sus interpretaciones y supersticiones encierran la sabiduría del mundo tradicional. Según Grierson, abunda la superstición en el Tío Remus y en el bajo fondo iletrado, pero es encantadora e inofensiva; en cambio, nada hay de encantador en la cumbre intelectual: en las agonías de Napoleón, en la humillación de Bismarck o en la locura de Nietzsche.